

MEET THEM WHERE THEY TEXT

Implementing a
texting-for-health
program at Ballard
High School in
Seattle, Washington

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Literature has shown that text messaging offers an innovative, low-cost way to reach wide-ranging populations. As prevalent users of text messages, teens are especially good targets for text message health interventions.

Building off of a broad base of formative research from both the Communications Department at Public Health—Seattle & King County (PHSKC) and student work in the Community-Oriented Public Health Practice program (COPHP), this project sought to expand and implement a previously created text message pilot program, My Way, at Ballard High School. A COPHP graduate student carried out this project in collaboration with the school-based health center staff and PHSKC. The main goals of this project were to:

1 Target messages to the Ballard High School community to increase the self-efficacy of students to perform suggested behaviors. Information was gathered from Teen Health Center staff, students, other faculty, as well as through web searches and neighborhood visits.

2 Try new enrollment strategies to expand enrollment. Recruitment and enrollment was expanded beyond the school-based health center to health classes. Health class students were offered extra credit to enroll in and evaluate the program.

3 Build a sustainable text message program model for Ballard High School and other schools. A toolkit with lessons learned and pointers on how to run a low-cost, low-resource text-messaging program was produced for other schools to use.

THE PROGRAM

The program was conducted in the first semester of the 2014-2015 school year for 10 weeks. Students who participated in the program were sent two messages a week on the subjects of eating right, staying active, stressing less, and dealing with drugs and alcohol using Call 'Em All, a web-based texting application. They were also sent announcements from the Teen Health Center. A brief evaluation was conducted after the 10-week intervention period to assess acceptability of the program.

RESULTS

- Eighty-two students completed the program. In a post-program survey (43 respondents), 86.0% of students reported that they “often” or “always” read the messages. A majority reported that they enjoyed receiving the messages, that they learned something new about the topic(s) they chose, and that they would sign up for the program again. In addition, 73.2% of students reported using the information or advice provided in the messages “sometimes,” “often,” or “always.”
- Offering extra credit in health class increased enrollment and the number of students who completed the evaluation from the previous year’s pilot.
- Messages that included local resources were popular among students and some reported that they were motivational in getting them to perform health behaviors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Other school-based health centers can use the program implemented at Ballard High School as a model for building their own text-messaging program. The online toolkit, **Meet Them Where They Text: A Guide for Implementing a Texting-for-Health Program through School-Based Health Centers**, offers steps to get started as well as text messages and information on how to target messages (available here: www.kingcounty.gov/health/texting).